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ABSTRACT

In order to assist professionals and policymakers more consistently engage parents in their work, this document uses the personal stories of several parents to illustrate how parents get involved in family programs and how some parents built on their natural leadership abilities to move from personal involvement to take on broader leadership roles. The report compares the client-driven and consumer-driven models of service delivery for families. The process of parental input is placed on a continuum from engagement to involvement to empowerment, with parent roles and actions defined at each phase. Seven stories of parents taking on leadership roles and tasks offer insight into how professionals and policymakers can move toward a consumer-driven model; the stories include ones in the areas of community recreation, child health, marketing and parent support, child safety, parent advocacy, early education and family support, special needs children and parent education. The report offers the following lessons for professionals who want to work with parents: (1) value time and be genuine; (2) use language carefully; (3) be relevant; (4) don't be intimidated by people with power; (5) make it a family affair and get everyone involved; (6) make the professional personal; (7) don't expect one parent to represent all parents; (8) listen carefully; and (9) don't shy away from the power of spiritual motivation, but respect diversity. Questions to assist parents in determining whether their involvement will be meaningful and worthwhile complete the report. (KB)

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Families and Work Institute

Miriam Westheimer

Parents Becoming *Leaders*

Getting Involved on Behalf of Children

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Parents Becoming *Leaders*: Getting Involved on Behalf of Children

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Acknowledgements

To the parents
For the children

The inspiration for writing this report came as my work brought me to Minneapolis, where I met an amazing group of women—all parent leaders—who were members of the Minnesota Parenting Association. They challenged almost all of my preconceptions about parent leadership, forcing me to think way out of the box.

For many years I have been involved with a parent-focused program called Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY), and through it I have met thousands of parents who taught me that as parents we all have so much in common—much more than we may think.

While working as a consultant to the Carnegie Corporation's *Starting Points* initiative, I met many provocative parent leaders and decided I wanted to write about them. That meant finding them, finding time in their busy schedules to interview them, and convincing them that their stories were important and worth repeating—yet again. I want to thank the parent leaders whose stories appear in this report as well as the many others whose stories, while no less important, do not.

Ellen Galinsky and Nina Sazer O'Donnell of Families and Work Institute (FWI) were willing to work with me to let the voices of these parent leaders be heard by a wider audience. Nina spent many creative hours helping to shape this report, and Ellen always managed to ask the toughest questions. Towards the end, Terry Bond of FWI was brought on to do what Terry does best—review critically, fine tune superbly and support endlessly. The wonderful staff at Families and Work Institute are the ones who took the words and made them look beautiful.

Of course, while I thank all those who helped write this report, I hold full responsibility for its content.

We hear it and say it all the time:

- Parents are their children's first and most important teachers.
- Parents are their children's best advocates.
- Parents are the experts on their own children.
- Parents know what's best for their children.
- Parents need to be front and center when making public policy decisions that concern children.

And yet, as a collective voice speaking on behalf of children, parents too often find that their voices are not heard or even sought after. It is still a struggle for many parents to make meaningful connections with the professionals and policy-makers who are trying to improve programs and services for children and families. And too few professionals and policy-makers are able to consistently engage parents in their work. To better understand these challenges, it might help to look outside the fields of education, health and human services.

Imagine, for example, that a major toy manufacturing company is planning a new product line for next year's season. The creative team has been busy making mock-ups for the big roll out. Who will they invite to test their products? Other toy manufacturers? Advertising companies? Or children and parents? Can you imagine the company taking its ideas to full production without extensive field testing with their users (the children) and the consumers (the parents)?

Why does it seem so obvious in this scenario that parents' opinions are essential to the product development process? And why is this kind of consultation so rare in the design of programs and services intended to help families in states and communities? Instead, we often find the following situations:

- Staff at a community center design a new daytime parent education program. When parents don't participate, it is assumed that there is no need for parent education or support in the community.
- A state health agency develops an immunization outreach program. Only after discovering that the outreach is not working are parent advisors brought in to improve the program.
- A new public television program for young children is ready to air. Since one of the program's goals is parental involvement, focus groups are held to find out how to get parents to watch with their children—*after* the program has been created.
- A free summer school program is created in a large urban school district. When a high percentage of eligible children do not participate, the administration concludes that parents are apathetic. Upon further investigation, it turns out that since the program ends every day at noon and is closed on Fridays, employed parents have found alternative, even if less educational, child care solutions.

All of these scenarios are real. It is striking that parents' input and advice is frequently sought after the fact—when it's often too late. To offer at least a partial explanation, let's consider some differences among the scenarios.

The toy company appropriately sees parents as consumers, decision-makers and people with knowledge and power. In fact, product and service designers depend on parents' decisions about where and how they spend their money. Yet the education, health and human service initiatives assume that professionals know best. If consumers are involved, it is usually to advise on how to implement something that was already developed or to explain why more people are not using services they did not help design and that may or may not actually meet their needs.

These scenarios also illustrate other distinctions. Members of a creative team developing new ideas for toys may well be parents themselves and try to imagine *themselves* making the decision to purchase a toy. Professionals and policy-makers designing services for parents may also be parents, yet they do not generally think of themselves as consumers of the services they design. Rather, they develop programs and services for *other* people and *other people's* children who are seen as knowing less about what's good for their children.

It appears that in spite of some great strides made by the family support movement to change the paradigm of service delivery for families to a consumer-driven model, we still have a long way to go. The differences in the scenarios above can also be understood as the differences in these two paradigms: parents as consumers and parents as clients.

Parents as Consumers	Parents as Clients
Decision-makers	Passive recipients
People who want the best for their children	People who don't know what's best for their children
Knowledgeable	Uninformed
Powerful	Powerless
Similar to professionals	Different from professionals

It stands to reason that services and programs jointly designed by parents, professionals and policy-makers are the most likely to succeed. In order to realize this potential, it might help to understand how parents get involved and how some parents, building on their natural leadership abilities, move from their personal involvement to take on broader leadership roles.

The Process of Parental Input

One of the many ways to consider parental input is as a continuum with different stages, actions and roles along the way. Parent leader and parent organization director, Roxy Foster has mapped a continuum of parent participation that moves through three phases of development:

Engagement → Involvement → Empowerment

According to Foster, *engagement* is the first stage, in which parents are invited to learn about program planning. During this time trust can begin to develop and parents can explore how to get involved. *Involvement* may require training and education, with parents as partners in the planning process. At the *empowerment* stage, parents can lead new efforts.

Another way to understand this developmental process may be to define parent roles and actions at each stage.

	Engagement	Involvement	Empowerment
Roles & Actions	Attending meetings Learning	Participating Receiving training Advising/acting	Leading Organizing

Let's take after-school programming as an example. When a parent is invited to attend a community-based organization's meeting about the need for after-school programs, the parent begins a process of engagement with the organization on this community concern. At this stage, parents are primarily gathering information and the work is primarily driven by professionals.

When the organization wants feedback from parents and asks the parent to participate in developing and conducting a survey of parents in the community, this parent becomes a partner with the professional staff and enters the stage of involvement. At this point the workload is often shared more evenly between parents and professionals.

If the parent survey reveals that other parents want before and after-school programs at the school and the parent organizes a parent meeting to discuss parent needs and design a program, the parent has become a leader and enters the developmental stage of empowerment.

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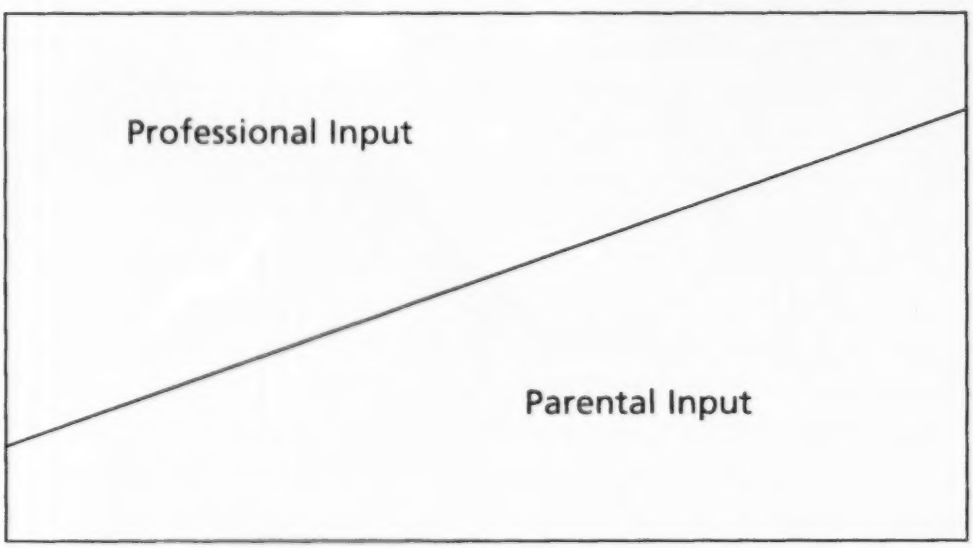
A similar process often takes place for parent leaders on a more personal level. Most parents first find themselves involved in a given issue because it directly affects their own children and family. Often parent leaders become most active on those issues that affect them most directly. Of course, not all parents move on to become leaders. Yet all parents who have taken some initiative on behalf of their own children are ideal candidates for the kind of involvement that is critical to the success of parent-focused initiatives.

As parents organize and as some parents move on to become parent leaders, the balance between professional and parental input will change. Appreciating this change and allowing room for more parental input are important parts of the process. Both parents and professionals can learn to accept this natural shift as a process rather than as a threat to the role or status of either parents or professionals.

Parent Organizing Over Time



Engagement →	Involvement →	Empowerment
Attend	Participate	Organize
Information Gatherer	Partner/Advisor	Leader

In today's world, responsible parenting is more than a full-time job. Most parents have their hands, heads and hearts full to capacity as they navigate through their daily work and family lives. And yet, if we are to move toward a consumer-driven model, if parents are to be *at the table* when decisions that impact their lives are being made, then some parents need to be a part of systems change efforts at all levels—community, local, state and national. For this, we need parent leaders. We need people who have grown in their roles as responsible parents and found ways to influence others—other parents, other professionals, and other systems. Thankfully, we have many good examples of such leaders. What follows are brief accounts of a few leaders, each engaged in helping other parents as they tackle their own parental responsibilities. These stories are intended to offer a glimpse into some personal journeys, to underscore some valuable lessons and to inspire all of those who care about families.

Journeys: Parents Making a Difference for Their Children

The field of parent education and support is filled with parents who have taken on leadership roles and tasks. The stories that follow describe the journeys of seven remarkable parent leaders.

ON RECREATION
Kim Giarratana's journey in Connecticut: from safer parks to Danbury Children First

One winter, record snowfall kept Kim Giarratana indoors with her young daughter. During a break in the weather, Kim took her daughter to the neighborhood playground. They found that much of the play equipment needed repair. She called the Parks and Recreation Department to let them know and was told that the playground would be fixed during the annual spring clean up. They asked her to send a letter listing the items she found broken, which she did.

Spring came and nothing happened, so Kim started making phone calls to get more information. Following several calls, she met with the Parks and Recreation director to discuss her concerns.

After that meeting not much happened, so Kim was advised by a friend active in local politics to contact Danbury Children First (DCF), a parent-led organization. Its community partners included the Mayor's Office, the United Way and the Superintendent of Schools.

My dream is that the concerns of children and families will **be championed in all communities** across the nation, that **parents will have an increasing** role as decision-makers for child and family issues, and that it will burn within each of us to make children a top priority...

- Kim Giarratana

Kim kept going to her neighborhood playground and Kim's daughter kept asking when they would fix the broken Donald Duck coil spring rider. After consulting with DCF, Kim realized she needed to get more involved. This time when she called Parks and Recreation, she threatened to

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call the Mayor if the playground wasn't fixed. The following day Donald Duck was gone. But other worn out and dangerous equipment remained.

Kim began organizing meetings with the DCF and Parks and Recreation directors, prompting them to conduct a citywide forum on recreation issues. This forum revealed that:

- the main playground in the center of downtown Danbury was at least 60 years old;
- Kim's neighborhood park was built in 1981, but not maintained in the following 15 years; and
- all the playgrounds in Danbury, including playgrounds in four parks and 13 elementary schools, were also in need of repairs.

After the forum, the shy and reserved Kim found herself on local access television, call-in radio and numerous public service radio announcements leading a community-wide effort to generate support for new playgrounds. Because of her ability to organize and advocate, Kim was asked to become the DCF Playground Improvement Coordinator. She and other parents worked closely with Parks and Recreation staff to overhaul all the city's playgrounds. With help from the DCF's Playground Improvement Issue Team, Kim then organized nearly 400 volunteers who installed four playgrounds over three weekends.

After successfully leading the Playground Improvement Issue Team, Kim was asked to help revive DCF. The director had recently resigned and the organization was in a state of upheaval. Kim became Chair of the Steering Committee and Board of Directors, positions she still holds today. She describes her work as both challenging and rewarding with lessons to learn at every step:

> *It continues to be a process of stretching—craning my neck to see the vision up ahead, gritting my teeth, digging in for the long haul, taking risks, and pushing myself to grow to meet new challenges.*

In 1999, Kim addressed a Family Support America conference and described her journey and her mission:

> *Coming to this conference is in itself a step in my personal growth...I have not traveled by myself for nearly 20 years and I've never flown by myself. I had so many concerns, but one by one they were all resolved.*
>
> *As a parent leader, it is my duty and privilege to lead by example and to guide with care. I give the parents I work with the freedom needed to put their children and family first. I lead them through their challenges with zeal, persistence and determination.*
>
> *I like to think of this work in the context of a song I learned: "It only takes a spark to get a fire going. And soon all those around will warm up to its glowing..." Let each of us be*

that single spark within our communities. As that spark glows and grows, let us set this nation on fire for children and families. Let us move from words to action. Let us show that parents do make a difference. Pass it on. Light that fire. And keep that fire burning.

ON HEALTH

Deleimy Castillo's journey in Rhode Island: from coping with lead poisoning to working for the Rhode Island Department of Health

As a mother of three young children, Deleimy relied on the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, which provides food to pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, their infants and children under age five who are at nutritional risk. She also participated in an early intervention home visiting program and two of her three children suffered from lead poisoning.

When her children were all in school, Deleimy began teaching English as a Second Language and doing community outreach work. She wanted to help others learn how to help themselves. When she saw an advertisement for a Parent Consultant to the Rhode Island Department of Health, she applied for the job and got it.

The Parent Consultant program incorporates consumer voices in planning, implementing and evaluating Division of Family Health programs to make sure they are family-centered, community-based and culturally sensitive. In a brief article entitled, "Have you ever worried that you will throw a party and no one will come?" Dr. Patricia Nolan, Rhode Island Director of Health, notes that this is exactly what happens when professionals sit in their offices and design programs by themselves:

Understanding what consumers want is vital to being able to improve public health by addressing family and community issues. Parent Consultants not only provide their own insights about what families want, but also enable other families to offer their own insights. Parent Consultants really link families to services. When we throw a party, we want people to come.

Parent Consultants must have used the services they promote. As a former WIC user, Deleimy began by conducting a community survey. She found that WIC participants felt discriminated against and were not receiving good customer service when they used their WIC checks. So Deleimy helped develop a WIC Secret Shopper program. Through the program, people use WIC checks to purchase food from different stores to make sure that WIC participants receive good customer service. Sometimes they even try to buy the wrong item to see how their mistake is handled. When Secret Shoppers get good service, they send a letter of appreciation to the store manager. When they do not get good service, they file a complaint. Deleimy now trains vendors on how to serve WIC participants.

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Deleimy is also a Parent Consultant for an even broader Parents as Partners Project that improves participation of eligible families in many Maternal and Child Health (MCH) programs. Parent Consultants recruit, train and support "Peer Parents," helping them organize house parties and presentations for their friends, families and neighbors about MCH preventive health, intervention and insurance programs. Deleimy began this assignment with focus groups in churches, GED classes, and at Parent-Teacher Organization meetings. She also interviewed parents and organization leaders and helped develop a parent survey to make sure that questions were asked in ways that would appeal to parents. She notes that bureaucratic survey language can be threatening, even if the information requested is not. According to Mia Patriarca, Community Projects Manager, more than 50 percent of parents who completed this survey reported using at least one MCH service after these events, and more than 80 percent said they shared what they learned with family and friends.

Deleimy soon found herself leading training sessions for doctors and other professionals who didn't know how or when to refer clients to MCH resources. Deleimy now sits on numerous committees including the Mayor's Early Childhood Task Force.

> *You know, sometimes I feel like I'm all committeed out. I'm bi-lingual; I'm Hispanic; and I'm dark-skinned, so I fill all kinds of slots. It's too much sometimes. But there still is so much to be done and we need more parent leaders like me.*

ON MARKETING

Roseann Hassey's journey in Ohio: from selling floor cleaner to building supportive parent communities

As a successful marketing professional at Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati, Ohio, Roseann married a Bostonian and followed him to Boston. Once there, she enrolled in Harvard Business School, determined to use her business experience in the not-for-profit world once she graduated. "After all," she said, "I love figuring out what people want and helping them get it. Isn't that what it's all about?" She got her MBA and her first taste of public sector work in a two-year stint as the Harvard Business School's Associate Director of Volunteer Opportunities and Placement where she developed a volunteer program linking business school expertise with community needs. She also helped create more not-for-profit opportunities for business school graduates.

Roseann's next job was leading the Reebok Women's Fitness Division. After five years, she returned to Ohio with her husband and two small children. Back in Cincinnati, Roseann wanted parenting information and support. Wherever she looked, she couldn't find programs that met her needs—the topics were wrong, she had no time to read lots of books, the time commitment was too great or the location wasn't convenient.

Roseann soon found Beech Acres, a not-for-profit organization which offered her a job reaching out to other parents. She could finally use her business and marketing skills to help other parents.

She began with a conference. Roseann knew that she needed support from her Board, compelling keynote speakers, workshop presenters, corporate sponsors, gift packages, and more. But as a marketer, she also knew that she needed to find out what parents want in order to successfully market the conference. She surveyed churches, parenting organizations and schools, with a goal of 250 responses. Then she found dynamic speakers and presenters who could address what the parents wanted to know. She got free newspaper advertising and sent conference information to parents through church newsletters, schools, Junior League bulletins and other groups. Although her goal was to have 300 parents at the first For the Love of Children conference, more than 1,000 parents signed up and the conference sold out several weeks in advance.

The conference fee was only $25, every parent had to bring another parent in order to attend, and 10 percent of the ticket revenue was given away as scholarships. Child care was available for children up to 12 years old for $10. And parents were treated with the respect and honor they deserve.

After the conference, Roseann wanted to find out what parents really liked and didn't like, holding four focus groups two months after the conference. She learned that parents liked skill-focused workshops and inspirational speakers. They enjoyed being treated well and were overwhelmed by the power of being with 1,000 other parents with similar concerns and issues. Many said they walked in feeling isolated and alone and left feeling part of a larger community.

Roseann sees the conference as one step in a process of helping parents weave webs of support and making sure that the support is parent-centered, not social service-centered. In her own words:

> *Parenting support needs to be reframed around what parents want to do most, and that is to raise their children really, really well.*

ON SAFETY

Kathi Lawrence's journey in Minnesota: from family child care provider to mayor

Kathi moved to Stacy, Minnesota with her husband, two children and a third child on the way. Stacy is a small, working class town of about 1,500 people. She found that people from other places were very judgmental about her new community: "People's reactions were so strong I could almost touch them. I couldn't stand that my children would be judged just because of where they lived," she recalled. She was even more concerned, however, when she discovered that Stacy's resources for children and families were very limited.

Kathi needed help for her middle son who was diagnosed as autistic when he was three years old. But available services were disjointed. One federally funded program provided a home visitor from 9:00 to 11:00 a.m.; another state-funded program provided a different home visitor from 11:00 a.m.

I believe there are three kinds of people: those who make things happen, those who watch what happens and those who wonder what happened. You must have the courage to take charge of your life. If you don't, someone else will.

- Kathi Lawrence

to 1:00 p.m. Funding rules prevented the two programs from coordinating their work. So Kathi tried to turn these fragmented services into the holistic and coordinated care her son needed. She held a meeting in her home with both home visitors. Together, with Kathi's direction, they developed a realistic, coordinated and responsive plan. Kathi then became a state-level advisor for one of these agencies and reports that the two service organizations now work together. Kathi later became a family child care provider so that she could care for her son and her other children and continue to work.

Kathi's journey escalated in 1997 when she took a group of children in her family child care program on a trip to the bank for the free cookies given out every Monday. After visiting at the bank, she and the children stopped in at the hardware store next door. While leaving, she and the children witnessed a robbery at the bank. She remembers seeing large men with masks on their faces and guns in their hands. As the only adult, pushing a stroller and watching children both in front of and behind her, Kathi was thankful that no one was hurt.

Kathi soon learned that this was the town's fourth bank robbery in three years. She went to a city council meeting and asked about police protection. She was informed that the township contracts for 15 hours of police protection each week—just a little more than two hours per day. Kathi went to more meetings and found she was getting nowhere. She decided she couldn't influence the system from the outside; she had to get inside. So she ran for Mayor. Although she lost by only two votes, she has no regrets:

> *The process of my running got people thinking and talking about children's issues. I ran on a children's agenda. Before I ran, people thought of me as the day care lady from down the street. Now they know my name and the issues.*

Soon after, Kathi formed Community Task Force Inc. to focus on children's issues. But people who joined had other agendas. Some wanted a new city hall. Others wanted a new fire department. When Kathi realized that she was in the minority, she decided to focus her political efforts elsewhere.

> *Everyone knows what's going on in this town, but nobody wants to do anything. Everyone says, "they" won't do anything. Who are "they"? Aren't we the "they" they are talking about? We should say, we won't do anything! Then at least we know where to point the finger. I always say, "If you don't take care of your business, nobody else will." And our children are all of our business. We all have to take care of them.*

Kathi then went to a city council meeting, where she saw that the list of people running for mayor had just one name on it—the name of a candidate she didn't like. She decided on the spot that the people of Stacy deserve to have a choice. Without a second thought, she added her name to the list of candidates. This time she won.

ON ADVOCACY FOR FATHERS

E.J. Junkins' journey in California: from single dad to National Advocate for Fathers

Getting his children to school on the first day of school required much more from E.J. Junkins than choosing which clothes they should wear. As a homeless, single parent of two young children camping out in the Northern California woods, E.J. had to hitchhike for seven miles with his children wearing clothes that were cleaned by hand with cold water. E.J. had been a U.S. Postal Service letter carrier and then started his own business which failed just as his first child was born. After the birth of his second child, his wife left the family and E.J. decided to take on parenting as his full-time job. One difficult circumstance led to another and he soon found himself homeless with two children.

Yet on that first day of school, after bringing his daughter to school and his son to the Forest Hill Head Start center, E.J. Junkins was introduced to what became his new career. E.J. arrived at the Head Start Center angry and scared. He was angry that his wife had left him alone with two children and he was scared that, because of his circumstances, state agencies might take his children away. Yet the Head Start staff saw beyond this fear and anger. "They gave me the best gift of all," E.J. remembers, "they gave me the gift of giving." Staff members, perhaps seeing his desire to contribute, asked for his help in painting the facility's porch. Donating his labor to a good cause sparked a desire to contribute in larger ways, too.

E.J.'s advocacy work began as he navigated service delivery systems and got more involved in his children's schools. Filling out forms, he noticed that there was always a box to indicate an absent father but not for an absent mother. Health agencies wouldn't release his children's health records to him, only to a mother. In spite of his many offers to volunteer at schools, he was never selected. When he finally decided that it was time to run for president of the Parents' Association, his intentions were questioned, but that didn't deter him—his campaign was a success. Still, everywhere he went, E.J. got messages that said: fathers do not care; fathers are trouble; fathers cannot be trusted.

E.J. quickly moved from personal advocacy to advocating for larger groups of parents. He became a member of the local Head Start Parent Policy Council, a parent representative to the regional Head Start Association, a regional Head Start Board Member, and then was elected to the Board of the National Head Start Association.

Volunteering became an integral part of E.J.'s life. As PTA President, he helped raise $30,000 for playground equipment and computers for his daughter's elementary school. He went back to

school for a degree in Early Childhood Education and also earned additional degrees in Social Studies and Liberal Arts.

E.J. soon found himself convincing CalWorks, a state agency that helps people get off welfare, to hire him as a Father Advocate. Here's how he describes his work:

> *Mostly, I listen very carefully. If I listen carefully enough, I can usually find out what's really bothering someone in our first hour together. I'm not a counselor and I'm not a mental health provider. I'm just another dad who's willing to listen and answer questions when I can. And to find answers when I have to. My job is to work with and advocate for dads.*

E.J. is very clear that he can offer information and even sometimes advice, but that everyone has to make his own choices.

> *The biggest lesson I've learned in my work is that I can have ideas, create programs, find resources and anything else I like, but if I don't listen to the client—and in my case, that's the father—then it's not worth anything.*

ON EARLY EDUCATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

Mary Hunter's journey in Pennsylvania: from a WIC office to the University of Pittsburgh's Family Support Policy Board

When Mary Hunter was raising her own three children, now grown, she almost always needed two jobs to make ends meet. Her early work experience included machine operator, tool and dye technician, operating room technician, cook, dietary aide, telemarketer and successful salesperson, all while trying to get her high school diploma. Mary describes herself as a very private person who didn't know about any parenting or early childhood programs in her community.

Many years later, while waiting in the WIC office in Pittsburgh with her seven-month-old granddaughter, Mary was invited to join a Early Head Start program to learn about child development. As the primary care provider for her granddaughter, and thinking that it had been quite some time since her own children were small, Mary agreed to attend.

Mary remembers learning how to use a car seat. When her own children were small, car seats were not required, so this was very practical information. As a result, she decided she'd better keep coming to the monthly meetings offered by the program. Because of her active participation, staff encouraged her to join the Parent Committee. At first she thought she had nothing to contribute, but she agreed to try. Her granddaughter loved coming along because she could play with other children, so Mary found herself going to lots of meetings. Soon she became President of the Parent Committee and sat on the By-laws and Personnel Subcommittees. She was then invited to join the Local Early Head Start Policy Council.

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Mary and her granddaughter began going to state budget hearings and other meetings. Each event opened new doors and provided her with new information. Her free time rapidly filled up and she found herself working as a full-time volunteer Parent Advocate. So when a paid position as Early Head Start Parent Liaison opened up at the University of Pittsburgh's Office of Child Development, Mary applied for and got the job.

As Parent Liaison, Mary finds ways to get parents involved and helps them in any way she can. She encourages parents to be more active in their children's lives and connects them with programs and services they need. Mary remembers how her involvement grew from her earlier interest in car seats. She knows that information for parents has to be timely, worthwhile and relevant. It also has to build on the parents' strengths, not their deficits.

Mary found many of her previous skills and knowledge were useful in her new job. For example:

- As an operating room technician, Mary learned that doctors are just people. She learned not to be intimidated by their education and status. The same holds true, she found, when you meet policy-makers.
- As a telemarketer, she learned to connect with people quickly, to listen carefully and to respond to their most pressing needs. This skill is essential for reaching out to parents.
- On the way to becoming the number one salesperson at the United Consumers Club, she learned what a difference it can make when you're told that you are doing a good job and that your work is appreciated. Mary never forgets this when she tries to get parents more involved.
- One supervisor taught her a lesson she will never forget and that she always shares with others, especially her professional colleagues: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Mary has learned that even without academic degrees, she has the respect of her community because she cares. Some professionals, she believes, need to show they care before others can benefit from what they know.

Mary is currently Co-Chair of the Family Support Policy Board, a group of government, foundation, corporate and civic leaders with half of the members being parents involved with Pittsburgh's network of family support centers. Through this Board and through Community Voices, another project that helps parents create and act on their own political agenda, Pittsburgh parents have become chief lobbyists for issues that affect children and families. Members of the legislature now frequently ask parents to speak at relevant hearings.

To encourage other parents to get involved, Mary shares one of her favorite lessons:

> *When you look at a person you think is very powerful you have to say to yourself, "When we get up in the morning, we all put our pants on the same way. We are all more alike than we are different."*

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ON CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND PARENT EDUCATION

Wayna Buch's journey in Hawaii: from foster child to community leader

Wayna Buch learned about the needs of children from her own early experiences as a foster child and later as a parent of a child with special needs and a foster parent of many other children:

> *I wanted to do more because of my own personal experiences in life. Coming from the school of hard knocks, I wanted to use what I learned about inner strength and the power of my own voice to help others. My first experience with advocacy began when I was 15 and told my own foster parents what I needed. I remember the impact of taking control of my life—even at age 15. I didn't just settle for whatever was handed to me.*
>
> *Parents of children with special needs often "settle" because they are unsure of their rights. I made it my mission to learn what my rights are and want to share that knowledge with others.*
>
> *So in my own journey, the first step was an awareness of my inner strength and ability to voice my needs. Next, came a quest for knowledge. Now, I have the desire to share and help others take that journey.*

As a foster parent, Wayna cared for special needs children coping with difficult family issues. She learned how to advocate for each of them in complicated systems and situations and with huge gaps in services. She is now parent co-leader for the Kauai Community Children's Council (KCCC), created by a federal mandate to improve child and adolescent mental health systems. County-level Children's Councils are the vehicles through which parents and other stakeholders are involved.

Wayna is also President of the Kauai chapter of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and is a member of the Good Beginnings Alliance, a statewide coordinating network of programs and services for young children and families. She brings her experience to her job as Education and Family Involvement Coordinator for Head Start Kauai.

Today I see myself as a community leader, as many others do. It has evolved naturally and easily for me because it is a passion with me. My love of children and desire to make this world a better place for them is my driving force.

- Wayna Buch

Of all her experiences, Wayna speaks most proudly of her work starting playgroups for families in small, isolated rural communities on the island of Kauai. Wayna would drive her van up to the front of a church, park or other community site where she unloaded crates of materials and furniture and set up a mobile play center. During these weekly playgroups for mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts, uncles and children, Wayna modeled best practices, demonstrating how to guide and encourage children's learning. She also supplied families

with bags of materials and play ideas, including simple home-based activities to support healthy child development.

As Wayna established these playgroups, she always looked for natural parent leaders who could organize, coordinate and lead their own playgroups. Once identified, professionals from the Good Beginnings Alliance help potential parent leaders learn child development and leadership skills. This "each one, teach one" approach to engaging parent leaders builds sustainability. Although Wayna no longer runs these playgroups, they are still thriving on Kauai and throughout Hawaii.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Professionals who want to work with parents

FROM: Parents

RE: Lessons Learned

1. **Value time and be genuine.** Parents are busy people and time is a precious commodity. Deleimy raised the importance of being sure that parents' time was well spent. Kim recommended asking the professionals whether they would attend the meetings to which they invite parents on their own free time. "If not," she says, "don't invite me. Why should I give up my time with my family for this if you wouldn't?"

2. **Use language carefully.** Remember that every profession has its jargon. But jargon is often not necessary and it can alienate people. Go back to the basics and use real, everyday words. Kathi describes how she now has no problem asking people to explain things over and over again, to clarify their language, until she understands.

3. **Be relevant.** Bring parents in on issues they are personally and passionately concerned about. Remember, it was the car seat information that attracted Mary to group meetings. Now she is running citywide policy councils. And Kim started out by wanting to get her playground fixed up for her daughter.

4. **Don't be intimidated by people with power.** Mary put it so clearly when she said that we all put our pants on the same way. Wayna found out that when it comes to children's issues, she is ready to talk to anyone.

5. **Make it a family affair and get everyone involved.** Get children involved too. The more children see us do this work the prouder we will all feel. Mary still takes her granddaughter with her to meetings. She doesn't want to be away from her so much of the time and she knows that her granddaughter learns in the process.

6. **Make the professional personal.** We are talking about all our children, my children and your children, not "other people's" children. We all need to share our personal experiences, struggles and issues as parents. Roseann got involved in organizing conferences for parents because she had a hard time finding the information and support she wanted. E.J. explained how his advocacy work against gender bias benefits everyone.

7. **Don't expect one parent to represent all parents. Beware of tokenism.** Remember how Deleimy described her worry about being the parent who fills all kinds of slots. Token representation is not genuine and does not allow the parent representative to participate fully. None of us represents the whole of any group.

8. **Listen carefully.** Talk to parents about what approaches, programs, changes, and plans make the most sense and will be the most supportive. E.J. defined his role first and foremost as a listener.

9. **Don't shy away from the power of spiritual motivation, but respect diversity.** Although many parents talk about spiritual guidance as central to their leadership work, most also value respect for diversity. It is important to strike a balance that allows parents to express their spiritual motivations but permits those with diverse beliefs to feel comfortable.

Questions for Parents to Ask:

The Council of Parent Leadership, a project of the Minnesota Parenting Association, developed a set of questions to help parents assess whether their involvement will be meaningful and worthwhile:

- Why was I asked to participate, and what perspective am I supposed to represent?
- What perspective do I truly represent?
- How will I be expected to bring information to and from the community or organization I represent?
- Does this work fit into my personal and professional life, and how do I define each?
- Can I fulfill commitments that are expected of me? (Do I have conflicts with meeting times? Can I commit to the number of days, months or years in the term of service?)
- Are supports such as orientation, translation, transportation and child care available if I need them?
- Will my involvement advance my skills and understanding?
- Does this organization respect diversity of views, and are its members flexible enough to change their course without losing sight of their vision and missions?
- Will my participation be valued?

[Taken from *America's Family Support Magazine*, Spring, 1999]

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Miriam Westheimer, ED.D.

After graduating from Barnard College in 1978, Miriam Westheimer entered a Masters program at Teachers College, Columbia University, in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. With the degree in hand, she moved to Israel to live, work and teach. In 1984, Dr. Westheimer returned to the United States and to Columbia University where she began her doctoral studies in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching. Upon completion of her doctorate degree in 1989, Dr. Westheimer was responsible for adapting and disseminating an innovative, home-based educational program developed in Israel called HIPPY—Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters. As a result of the growth and success of the HIPPY program, HIPPY USA was established as an independent educational corporation, and for the next 10 years, Dr. Westheimer served as its Executive Director and President. Today, in addition to her work as an independent consultant, she serves as the Director of the international network of HIPPY programs.

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